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## Celebrating Pagan Festivals



# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest  
Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
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Photo by Marja Flick-Buijs <http://stockfresh.com/gallery/Zela>

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## Inquiring Words

### We Give Thanks For The Animals

We give thanks for the animals

Who live close to nature,

Who remind us of the sanctities of birth and death,

Who do not trouble their lives with foreboding or  
grief,

Who let go each moment as it passes,

And accept each new one as it comes

With serenity and grace.

Enable us to walk in beauty as they do

At one with the turning seasons,

Welcoming the sunrise and at peace with sunset.

And as we hallow the memory of good friends now  
departed,

Who loved abundantly and in their time were loved,

Who freely gave us their affection and loyalty,

Let us not be anxious for tomorrow

But ask only that kindness and gratitude fill our hearts,

Day by day, into the passing years.

— Gary Kowalski

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faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>



# Welcoming light and darkness

By Yvonne Aburrow

Before you start celebrating Pagan festivals, ask yourself why you want to do this. Is it because you want to include those members of your church who identify as Pagan? Is it because you want to feel more closely attuned to natural cycles and seasons? Or is it because you want to attract local Pagans to your church? (And which of these reasons do you think is a good reason?)

If Unitarians are going to celebrate the Pagan festivals, it needs to be in a manner that reflects Unitarian beliefs about how the world works, whilst remaining respectful to the Pagan origins of the ritual. If you transfer a ritual or practice to another tradition, it is almost inevitable that its meaning will change. Look at the way “forest Christians” have adapted Pagan festivals (disrespectfully towards Paganism, in my opinion).

At least Unitarians respect the Pagan worldview, so borrowing our rituals is less of a problem.

## Some important points about the Pagan worldview

Pagan beliefs about magic and the spirit world are different from Unitarian beliefs, and this will affect how you do Pagan rituals. If you are going to call the quarters or cast a circle, what do these practices mean to you? To most Pagans, calling the quarters is regarded as calling elemental spirits to protect your ritual space. It also aligns us to the four directions and the four elements, positioning us in relation to the cosmos.

Casting the circle is believed by most Pagans who do it to create a container in which to work magic (so you probably don’t need to do this).

An important point about Pagan symbolism is that darkness is not seen as negative, but as a time of rest and renewal and refreshment before the return of daylight. Some Unitarians use darkness as a metaphor for ignorance and evil. That symbolism has no place in Pagan ritual.

In Wicca, darkness does not symbolise evil. The darkness is necessary for rest, growth, and regeneration. Death is not evil, but a necessary adjunct to life. If there were no death and dissolution, there could be no change or growth. The cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth is part of the interaction of the polarities. Suffering is also part of the process of growth; just as a tree is shaped by the wind, we are shaped by our experiences. It is only by experiencing suffering that we acquire sufficient depth to know the fullness of joy. It is then that the full light of consciousness dawns in us, and we achieve mystical communion with the divine.

But what if we never emerged into the light? What if we were always suffering? This would only be the case if time were linear and not cyclical. In the Wiccan worldview, we go through cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, but not in an endlessly repeating, always-the-same kind of way, rather there is change and growth. The pattern is an ascending spiral, not a treadmill. We pass through light (spring and summer) and descend into darkness (autumn and winter). But just as the seasons are not the same each time, nor are the greater cycles.



A Wiccan Altar set up for a ceremony by DragonOak's Workshop via flickr

These are the upcoming festivals in the Pagan Wheel of the Year. The rest will be described in part 2 of this article in the next issue of *The Inquirer*.

## Autumn Equinox (21 September)

At the Autumn Equinox, day and night are equal (but after this the nights get longer), so most Pagan rituals focus on this, and on the importance of balance. The festival also honours the Celtic god Mabon, who was imprisoned in a tower for many years. It’s also the fruit harvest; for this reason, I associate it with the Roman deities Pomona and Vertumnus. A celebration of Autumn Equinox could focus on the sensual delights of food and the harvest of work and creativity, as well as the balance of light and dark.

In China, they see life as the balance of opposites – yin and yang, night and day, life and death, eternally cycling around each other in the great dance of existence, the dynamic equilibrium of nature. Equilibrium means “equal freedom” – freedom to move, to grow and to change; freedom of choice.

This dynamic balance of opposites can also be seen in the dance of the seasons – “a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted”. (*Ecclesiastes* 3:2) The wheel of the year turns; falling in the autumn, rising in the spring. As it falls in the autumn, and the nights draw in, we turn inward, towards home, and hearth, and spiritual things; baking, and making jam and wine; creative projects.

In Pagan tradition, there are three harvests; the corn harvest at Lammas; the fruit harvest at Autumn Equinox; and the harvest of meat at Samhain, when some of the cattle would have been slaughtered and preserved for the winter.

A Unitarian celebration of Autumn Equinox could focus on gratitude for food and the harvest of work and creativity, as well as the balance of light and dark.

## Possible structure

- Participants stand or sit in a circle
- Check-in
- Chalice lighting
- Honouring the four directions and the four elements
- Singing of *Spirit of Life*

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# This life is what's precious to Pagans

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- Opening words: introduction to Autumn Equinox
- A person dressed as Day and a person dressed as Night meet and dance in the centre of the circle (or multiple people)
- Participants step forward and offer readings / thoughts about night and day, balance, and fruit harvest, harvest of life / work
- Story: *Pomona and Vertumnus*
- Sharing of fruit
- Singing of F L Hosmer's hymn about autumn
- Closing words

## Samhain (31 October)

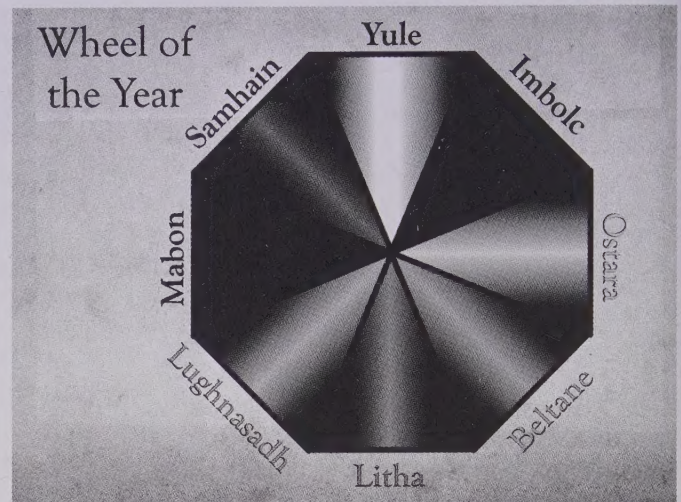
Samhain is a festival honouring ancestors. It is also the "harvest of meat" when cattle would be slaughtered before the winter. To the ancient Celts, however, Samhain was a festival of liberation from oppression. In East Anglia, it was known as Hollantide. Many Wiccans use Samhain rituals to honour, remember, and commune with their loved ones who have passed on.

Samhain is the Irish word for the month of November. The ancient Irish festival held at this time was about the renewal of freedom – legends associated with it tell of heroes who freed their people from bondage. So the association with the dead was probably imported to this country by Christianity, as this was the feast of All Saints and All Souls. After the Reformation, of course, the importance of these festivals was downplayed, and by the early 20th century, folklorists were speculating that the origins of All Hallows were actually Pagan. The first stirrings of the Pagan revival started in the early 20th century, so the idea of Samhain being associated with the dead was imported into Paganism.

Pagans tend to focus on the preciousness of this life, not some future one beyond death. Hence all these traditions want to celebrate and remember the lives of our ancestors. Ancestors can be relatives and friends who have died, or people from the past whom we admire (we often honour both). These people have shaped who we are now – given us life, given us inspiration, guided us, comforted us, and nurtured us – and it comforts us to remember them and commune with them.

Many people believe in reincarnation, and that the consciousness resides in an in-between place between lives. In Paganism, the dead are seen as not being very far away – only a heartbeat away – and many Pagans say that "the veil between the worlds is thin" at Samhain, because the tides of life are on the ebb as winter approaches, and because the encroaching darkness of winter is seen as a time for contemplation, remembrance, and introspection.

Pagans do not see darkness and death as evil, but as part of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. If there were no death, there would be no growth, no change, and no birth. If there were no darkness, the seeds could not gestate in the warm darkness of the earth; if there were no night, there would be no sleep, and no stars and moonlight. If there were no winter cold, there would be none of the beauty of autumn, the seeds would not germinate, and germs would not be killed by the frost. Darkness is the Yin spoken of by the Taoists – one half of the divine dance of the cosmos. Samhain or Hallowe'en is one of eight festivals of the Pagan wheel of the year – part of



Pagan Wheel of the Year illustration by Imbolc.cerddwr via Wikimedia commons

the dance of the elements around the wheel of the seasons, one of the many interlocking cosmic cycles of which our lives are an intimate part.

In many cultures, especially in Mexico, All Souls is the Day of the Dead – *Día de los Muertos* – when people go to visit family graves, and set up altars for them in the home. This is not a morbid practice, but an acknowledgement of death in the midst of life, death as part of the natural cycle.

So why should we reintegrate this festival into our spiritual practice? Because in Britain, death is swept under the carpet, ignored and feared. If we acknowledged it (at least once in the year), it would be an invitation to live more fully and mindfully. If we ignore it, it becomes part of the shadow, the part of our psyche that we reject and that contains our fears and follies, and which we project onto other people: the 'Other', the outsider, the transgressor.

Whereas if we recognise death as being part of the natural cycle, like the seasons of the year, then we can live more integrated lives, living in and for the moment.

Samhain is also the time when, as the nights get longer and the winter grips the land, we descend into our own depths. Summer is a time for being extrovert, creative and expansive; winter is a time for curling up by the fireside and going within oneself to find the poetic, the spiritual and the quiet side of ourselves – the forgotten aspects, perhaps even the side of ourselves that we have repressed and need to examine.

The presiding deity of winter is the Crone Goddess. She has been feared and denigrated in recent centuries – people speak of old wives' tales, haggard old witches muttering in corners, and so on. But traditionally, old women were the ones who were the keepers of stories and other traditional wisdom such as herb lore and midwifery. She is the midwife and the one who washed, anointed and laid out the dead, the one who cuts the cord of both life and death. She represents merciful release; but she also possesses the wisdom of old age. Wisdom is traditionally represented (in the Bible and in other traditions) as a feminine being or quality. Wisdom is the joining together of instinct and experience and knowledge. It is the wisdom of the body, the knowledge of when to act and when to refrain from acting, when to speak and when to keep silent. Wisdom

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Joseph Chamberlain celebrated

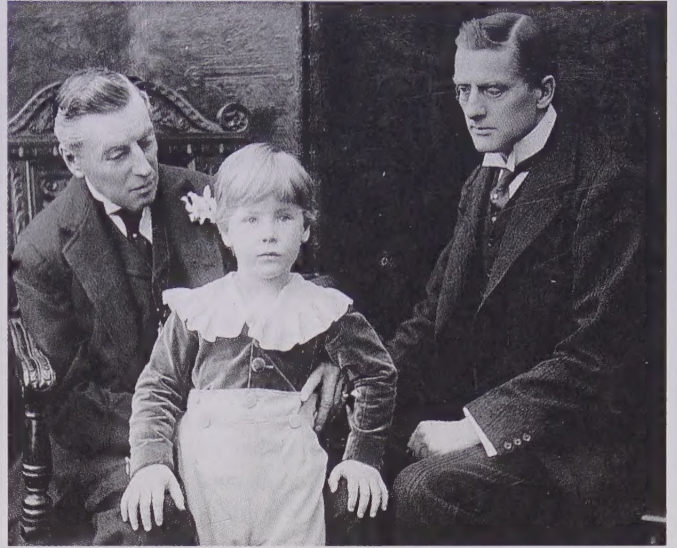
# His like never seen before or since

In June, Unitarian New Meeting in Birmingham held an interfaith service to mark 100 years since the death of Joseph Chamberlain. Alan Ruston spoke on Chamberlain's legacy and his talk is excerpted here.

'England has lost a great statesman, Birmingham a loyal citizen and our household of faith a distinguished member.' So said the Unitarian journal, *The Christian Life*, in reporting Joseph Chamberlain's death in July 1914. He was rather more than this – he was a colossus of the political system, the man who revolutionised the life and nature of Birmingham, and was the most famous Unitarian of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His like had never been seen before or indeed since.

Much has been written about Joseph Chamberlain (JC from now on) as to how after becoming an MP in 1876 in the next 30 years he brought down the Liberal government in the 1880s by refusing to support home rule for Ireland, after which he left them with his group of what were called Liberal Unionists, to join the Conservative Party. Then in the period 1903-1906 he split the Conservatives by his advocating Imperial preference which helped ensure their defeat in the General Election of 1905. He was charismatic; a superb orator who debated those who opposed him into the ground, cutting a distinctive figure in his black velvet coat and monocle. Winston Churchill said of him that he was 'a splendid piebald: first black then white, or in political terms first fiery red, then true blue'.

The fiery-red stage came in the 1870s when he revolutionised Birmingham. He took up politics when aged about 40, when he retired from business, moving on from great success in the firm of Nettlefold and Chamberlain who at one stage made two-thirds of the screws manufactured in this country. Becoming Mayor of Birmingham in 1873, he invented what was later called 'gas and water socialism' – acquiring land for slum clearance and the forcible purchase of local gas and water companies – which turned the city plagued with slum-like



Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) with his son Austen (1863-1937) and his grandson Joseph. George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

conditions into a model municipality.

Death rates were slashed; public and private money was spent on libraries, swimming pools and schools. By 1900 many said that it was now impossible to recall what Birmingham was like 50 years before, so changed was it from JC's efforts of being a city boss. An admirer said that JC uniquely 'parked, paved, assized, marketed, gas and watered and improved' the City to make it unrecognisable.

JC created a whole atmosphere of reform, with his supporters, inside the Liberal Party by introducing what he called the Radical Programme, of land reform, more direct taxation, free education and universal male suffrage. It was the Irish ques-

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## Honouring crones and souls gone on before

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comes from reflection upon experience and knowledge.

The Crone is also the Goddess of the Waning Moon, which represents a time of letting go and ebbing away, so it is traditional at Samhain to let go of aspects of your life that you do not need or want any more.

Many Unitarian churches in the UK now hold Samhain / All Souls services to honour their loved ones who have passed on.

### Possible structure

- Participants stand or sit in a circle
- Check-in
- Chalice lighting
- Honouring the four directions and the four elements
  - Place photos of loved ones on the altar
  - Singing of *Mother Spirit, Father Spirit*
  - Opening words: introduction to Samhain & All Souls
  - Honouring of Unitarian martyrs (Servetus, David etc.) and all who have died for freedom of conscience



Yvonne Aburrow

- Participants step forward and light candles and say a few words about their loved ones who have passed on

- Singing of *Honourable Saints*
- Meditation on life, death and rebirth
- Sharing of food (soup?)
- Closing words

Yvonne Aburrow is a Pagan author and friend to the Unitarian movement. Her forthcoming book is 'All Acts of Love and Pleasure: Wicca for Everyone' will be published by Avalonia Books. (<http://avaloniabooks.co.uk/forthcoming/>) For information on her previous books see: [www.pinterest.com/stroppyrabbit/my-books/](http://www.pinterest.com/stroppyrabbit/my-books/)

For more information on creating Pagan rituals, Yvonne recommends 'Neopagan Rites: A Guide to Creating Public Rituals that Work'. (2007) Llewellyn, ISBN-10: 0738711993

Resources are also available from the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, an organisation within the US Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations. For more information see [www.cuups.org](http://www.cuups.org)



# 'JC' was dedicated to Unitarian ideals

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tion a few years later that prevented its early achievement. JC changed allegiance to the Conservative side and became involved in the cause of the Empire. He played an assertive and controversial role in the conduct of the Boer War. His stroke when in his early 70s in 1906 cut off his activity which he then concentrated on the political career of his eldest son Austen.

There were other ventures associated with this engine of activity. The University of Birmingham was essentially his creation. In the 1890s the new universities – what we now call the red bricks – were seen as confederations with the centre being a holding organisation. The roughly Midlands university was to consist of Mason College Birmingham, with the colleges at Nottingham and Bristol. He changed his mind on this and publicly announced: 'Birmingham must have its own university and I'll see to it that this happens.' A great deal of money followed, plus he encouraged massive gifts of land in Edgbaston. A Unitarian correspondent in July 1914 in the *The Inquirer* described one of JC's proposals:

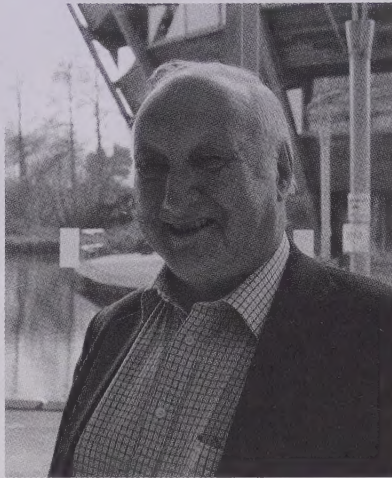
'At an early meeting when plans were discussed for the founding of the University, JC declared that the first building to be erected must be a Sienna Tower. Everyone else opposed this idea, but he was the man who knew what he wanted and how to get it; and in an hour's time all came round to his view, and there the tower stands.'

The massive tower based on that in the city of Sienna in Italy is at the centre of the campus. His name is on it in large letters – the Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock Tower. It must have been quite an experience sitting on a committee with JC as his force of personality, guile and sheer power of money and influence would have meant you'd have to follow in the tide he'd created.

Birmingham became the first of a new type of civic university and JC helped create our modern university pattern. Because he secured the large gift of land, Birmingham became the first campus university in Britain. And just remember that playing a signal role in creating Birmingham University was just a side activity compared with his thrust and administrative flair in politics, as well as speaking all over the country and enthusing the crowd.

What about his family background and religious affirmation? For all that he was Birmingham through and through, JC was born in and died in London. He came from a line of businessmen and their wives who were dissenters; JC was a Unitarian born and bred, an affirmation from which he never wavered, and he was proud of it.

JC was attuned to those aspects of the Unitarian faith that emphasised individualism, self reliance, moral earnestness and social action. Most orthodox Christians of course saw Unitarians as outside the mainstream of religious life. This 'outsideness' had an effect on family life, making individuals stick together and led to marriages among cousins and associated religious families. For example of JC's father, another Joe, it was said, 'his religion was to him the life within the life.'



Alan Ruston

When anyone was first introduced he would sometimes say at once, "Yes sir, Joseph Chamberlain and a Unitarian". If they swallowed that it was alright.' JC senior's other personal affirmation was 'tell the truth and pay cash.'

JC junior belonged to the Unitarian chapel in the City of London (now Unity Church Islington) up until the age of 18, taught in the Sunday School, an activity he took with him to Birmingham at the New Meeting. His first two marriages were to Unitarians and we get the associations with the Nettelfolds, Crosskeys, the Martineaus and similar Unitarian business families. The marriage relationship between these families over generations has been said to be 'like

a complicated piece of knitting.' Both JC's wives died young in childbirth and as a result JC stated later that he gave up personal religious belief. He became what he called 'a reverent agnostic,' a term subsequently adopted by his son Neville about himself.

However he was always a generous financial supporter of the Church of the Messiah in Broad Street, Birmingham (built in 1862 and now Birmingham New Meeting in Five Ways). Each new Unitarian minister was invited to JC's home Highbury Hill to be grilled as to their suitability. In 1872 in a speech to a Unitarian gathering he said, 'To my mind it has always been the great pride and glory of Unitarianism that its professors had never been indifferent to the welfare of the people in every sense ... and to the great cause of civil and religious freedom'.

JC passed onto his sons and daughters three rules, firstly always tell the truth, secondly when you are told to do something, obey at once asking why afterwards, and thirdly if a thing is worth doing it's worth doing well. His son Austen, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and his younger son Neville also Chancellor and PM, followed these instructions. Neville, another Mayor of Birmingham, had an uncertain time as PM but in the 1920s as a Cabinet minister helped create a new era by abolishing the workhouses in 1928. So JC's moral influence lived on into another age.

There is a story told, of uncertain validity, of the Unitarian Van Mission, which went round the country before WW1 in a horse drawn van spreading the truth as they saw it. One heckler is supposed to have shouted, 'You tell me the names of two famous Unitarians.' The reply was 'Jesus Christ and Joseph Chamberlain.' Such was the latter's fame and attraction to multitudes in the decades before 1914 but who also loved growing orchids quietly at his home in the bosom of his family.

Winston Churchill said in an obituary that JC 'was the man who made the weather. He was the man the masses knew.' Andrew Marr, in his recent *History of Britain* on the BBC, stated that JC was once among the most famous, and infamous, men on the planet. This recognises what a contentious figure he was and remains so to this day but a remarkable Unitarian nonetheless.

*Alan Ruston is a Unitarian historian.*



# Five years of growth for ICUU

*It is five years since the Rev Steve Dick, former Unitarian chief officer and member of the Executive Committee, was appointed Executive Director of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU). In April 2013 he gave up his ministry at Horsham to take on the ICUU job full time. In January 2014 ICUU held its biennial Council Meeting, its largest gathering ever, followed by an international conference for Ministers, in a cold and snowy New York. With signs of real growth in the organisation, as new groups emerge and join and one established denomination (Netherlands) joins and offers to host the next major gathering, 'The Inquirer' felt it was time to invite Steve to share some of his thoughts and feelings about the expanding international dimension of Unitarianism. John Midgley did this interview.*



**It's a year and a half since you gave up your ministry and changed from half time to full time Executive Director of ICUU. How's it going? Are you glad you took what looks like a big step into the unknown?**

Well I miss the wonderful folk from my ministry in Horsham, but it is a blessing to have more time to focus on this important work. And it *is* a ministry in a real sense. Most of my time is spent in the field or in on-line meetings and conversations helping people where Unitarianism is new to get started in creating sustainable communities of faith.

**How did you get into this international activity? What attracted you to it?**

It was international activity that brought me to the UK in the first place. I am American born, and had been working for the International Association for Religious Freedom in Germany and had come to know some special British Unitarians, such as Roy Smith, Andrew Hill, Chris Hayhurst and David Usher. What attracted me in a deeper sense is that I have never felt fully comfortable anywhere. I always feel different in various ways from people around me and it leads me to reach out to experience what is different as much as what is familiar. Unitarianism to me is more a family than a faith. It provides a community that gives me a feeling of being at home even while exploring the boundaries of my roots and the horizons of my spirit. A fascinating effect of getting to know Unitarians elsewhere – who are very different from me – is that somehow I also learn more about myself.

**So what is happening in ICUU? It seems to have changed a lot since David Usher floated the idea at the Unitarian**

**General Assembly Annual Meetings all those years ago.**

The size and scope of the mission has changed, in no small part due to the way the internet has transformed communication and community. Yet in fundamental ways I think ICUU may be even truer now to the vision floated by David at the outset. It continues to connect existing groups, but increasingly the focus is on the explosion of new expressions of liberal and progressive religion in places and in forms we have not seen before. For a time we were reluctant to be proactive with the new groups, and this held us back. Also, our limited resources meant we used to applaud people in other countries that found out about Unitarianism, but then kept them in a holding pattern until they had formed a group big enough to meet our membership criteria. We learnt that waiting until groups are 'ready' meant

starving them of the support, encouragement and collaboration they needed while they were young. Now we try to be more active.

**This must involve you in a lot of 'jet-set' travel. Do you enjoy this? I understand ICUU has member groups on five continents.**

It's not exactly 'jet-setting!' I do travel a fair bit, but using discount fares, staying in budget accommodation and eating simple local fare. We operate on a very limited budget, regretting we cannot get around more. We are so busy that I have little time to look around as a tourist. I often come back from these trips tired and weary. But do I enjoy it? Yes, every minute of it. I have the pleasure and privilege of seeing what a difference new, indigenous, expressions of what we usually call Unitarianism can make in different cultures and societies.

**What is the attraction for the new groups that have joined? What are they like and what does ICUU have to offer them?**

The way Unitarian communities develop has changed significantly, and we see it perhaps most clearly in cultures other than our own. The initial impetus is no longer the gathering of a group. What we usually see now is an individual or two who find out about Unitarianism, mostly from the internet, and become 'infected' with our faith. They then become entrepreneurs of progressive religion, gathering around them people of similar spirit and aspiration. In the past it was believed the only way you could do this was by being a missionary, compelling people to 'buy in' to your

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# ICUU offers new ways of seeing things

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mission, your solution, your mind-set. Now we encourage leaders who want to be visionaries rather than missionaries, who have a vision of a faithful relationship with the world and invite others into spiritual community to figure out together how best to embody that vision. The passionate people of this path that I have come to know and work with don't want to be American Unitarian Universalists or to be British Unitarians, although they certainly want to be in dialogue and community with Americans, British, Canadians, *etc.* ICUU offers them a community that is not owned by one culture or expression of liberal faith, no matter how well-meaning or wise, but relishes the diversity among us in a unique way. The two things I think hold ICUU together and attract groups to us are our twin convictions: that differences can unite us by making us free to be who we are, coupled with a commitment to collaboration with those who may see their mission in different ways but share a vision of right relationship in the world.

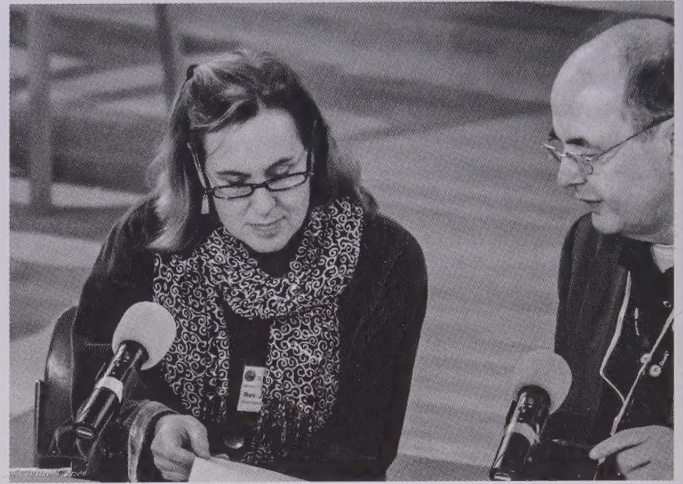
**All of this must inevitably mean a lot of work and a lot of money. Who does all the work and where does ICUU get its funding from?**

From its members and supporters; and ICUU works in partnership with other organisations. That helps us achieve amazing things. And it doesn't take as much money as you might think. Unitarians in Burundi, for example, needed to have a church building, before the government would recognise them as a religious organisation. The cost of buying land and building a church was a mere £18,000. The money was found. Unitarians in Kenya are seeking to set up a network of social justice projects, involving their six local groups, making a difference in their local community and offering work to members, in an environment of pervasive unemployment. The cost of running such a network for a year for Unitarians in an entire country is only £3,600! ICUU does not have a huge staff. The world is its 'parish' and on the payroll are 1½ staff. We need volunteers to help us and we need everyone's support to turn the ½-staff position into a full-time one. This could make a big difference. And we dream not of a large central staff, but of team members spread around the world, working regionally and locally in the service of our global 'rainbow vision'.

**We like to publish news from the international scene. Here's your chance to say something to our readers. Why should Unitarians out there in our congregations take an interest in ICUU and support it financially?**

It is mutually beneficial, but I had probably better issue a warning. If you take an interest in ICUU, you may discover new

ways of looking at things. You may become excited about what other cultures have to offer. You may be renewed and rediscover passion about your own faith by witnessing and sharing how different we can be, but still united in love and solidarity. If you support ICUU financially, you might help the world by providing 'seeds' our sisters



*The Revs Jill McAllister and Steve Dick at a recent meeting of the ICUU. Photo by Mina Carson ICUU*

and brothers can grow to develop their own capacity. These things are risky if you are committed to staying the same. So think carefully before you join us in making a difference.

**Where to from here? When is the next opportunity to participate? How can readers learn more?**

The next event is a regional Leadership School for Europeans, to be held in Transylvania in September. The next full Council Meeting will be in July 2016 in the Netherlands. Watch our website for details: [www.icuu.net/](http://www.icuu.net/). All are welcome at our gatherings. In the meantime, there is an active *Facebook* page and an email list to provide information about news, developments and upcoming activities.

Congregations may be interested in our Coalitions Programme which invites groups from around the world to partner with other such groups in working with emerging groups. Each Coalition member contributes what they can. We are in the process of developing one for Unitarians in Kenya. Sound interesting? Contact us. We also run webinars to give everyone an opportunity to learn more and to speak with Unitarians elsewhere. Recordings of some of the past webinars can be found on our *Facebook* page and the ICUU website. My ½-time colleague, the Rev Jill McAllister and I are planning a special webinar for British Unitarians so we can tell you more about our work, answer your questions and introduce you to some special guests. I can send you a personal invitation for that webinar. Contact me at [execsec@icuu.net](mailto:execsec@icuu.net). And if your congregation, district or other body would like to know more about ICUU, I can be available for services and talks about our global Unitarian community, in return for expenses and a donation to ICUU. But before you consider any of this, think carefully and read the warnings on the label! Your involvement will make a real difference in the international Unitarian world and it can lead to real differences and changes in *you*! Are you ready for that?

*Finally, we'll mention a current fundraising appeal, 'A Seasonal Gift for the Global Unitarian and Universalist Community'. For further information on this, and to send donations large and small, contact former ICUU executive committee member, The Rev Celia Midgley, 2 Hirds Yard, Skipton, N. Yorkshire, BD23 2AF. [celiamidgley@hotmail.com](mailto:celiamidgley@hotmail.com)*





# Who do you think you are -- really?

Who exactly are we? Does anyone truly know the answer to that question? Who do we think we are? It is a well-known phrase isn't it? 'Who do you think you are?' Now usually it's said to someone who is getting a bit too big for their boots, but in recent times it has taken on a different meaning due to the well-known television series that goes by the same title. Each episode follows a celebrity as they trace their family tree and discover interesting facts about their ancestors.

Now, no doubt the program is popular because it is about the lives of these celebrities; but that is not the only reason. I suspect that its real popularity is due to the fact that it taps into a fascination that so many of us share. It seems that most of us wish to know where we come from and I suspect that one of the reasons for this is that we believe it will help us come to a better understanding of who we are.

No one person lives a life separate from those around them and the history that they come from. Our lives are not singular, cellular ones. The whole history of life has brought us to the point we are at today and who we are has been created from this.

This is beautifully illustrated by Thich Nhat Hahn, who wrote in 'Present moment, wonderful moment' 'If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people.' All that has been before is a part of who we are. So who do you think you are?

In Genesis 1:26 we hear the phrase, 'Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;' It is describing humanity being made in God's image, in God's likeness. Now what on earth could this mean? Well image, from the Latin 'imago' means reflection or portrait it does not mean exactly the same as. I believe that this passage is suggesting that each of us has something of Divine within us, that we are a reflection of the divine and that this brings a duty to humanity to reflect this image into the world in which we live.

This is a real responsibility, to reflect the divine love in life, to incarnate it into being. I wonder how often we actually achieve this.

I believe that most of our human problems stem from our rejection of this 'likeness', from our inability to see that we are children of love, formed from love. That this Divine spark is an aspect of our very human being. I know when I look back at my darkest days it is this that frightened me the most and so I rejected it. I know that I am not unique in this thinking about who I am. I feel that so many of us are frightened of this spark of 'likeness from which we are formed'.

Now, of course, this is not all that we are. We humans are capable of the worst kinds of horrors. We only need look at the news to recognise this. I do believe that this stems from our continual failure to recognise this sacredness either within ourselves or one another.

So how do we begin to recognise this sacredness in each other once again? Well I believe that the answer is simple and it begins with one another, with the person we next meet. Just take a look at their face. We only really need to look into one another's faces to truly recognise this incredible sacred

## From Nothing to Everything

by  
Danny Crosby



uniqueness, no two faces are exactly alike and each face has so much to tell of the person looking back at us. When was the last time you truly looked at someone?

Our faces reveal so much of who we are to one another. Think about when you meet up with an old friend or relative, one who you have not seen for many years. How often do they say 'come on let's have a good look at you' and how often do they then look into our faces to see how we are? And isn't the response often fascinating for it either brings immense joy or gut-wrenching sadness as they see us exactly as we are – it is written all over our faces. I remember in my darkest days how I used to hate people doing this to me, as I was afraid that they would be able to see right into my soul and know that things were not OK. We never see ourselves exactly as we are; we certainly do not see ourselves as others see us. We see an image of ourselves, a reflection, but that is not who we truly are. We need others, others who we know intimately to even begin to know ourselves as we truly are. We need to look into one another's faces and see what it is that they are, in order to truly know who we are. We need to look into one another's faces and do you know what, if we do, we may just catch a glimpse of the divine incarnating in life once again. So who do you think you are? It really matters you know. It matters who you think you are and who you think everyone else you meet is. Our very lives depend upon how we see ourselves and one another. It matters because life itself matters. Well it does if we believe that we are children of love, formed from love. Each unique and each with something vital to offer to life.

Take a good look at yourselves and take a good look at one another. What do you see?

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Urmston and Altrincham.*

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# Letters to the Editor

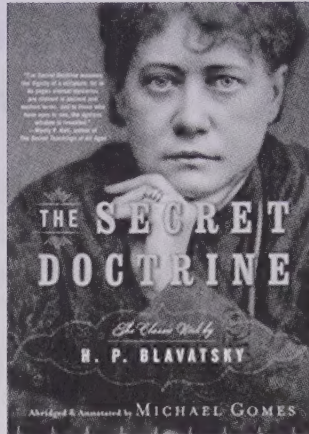
## Unitarianism and Theosophy create spiritual balance

To the Editor:

Nearly seven years ago now I came to the Chorlton Unitarian Church (CUC), where I later became a member. I was going through a bad phase just then, and a friend (who was already a Unitarian) recommended that I try CUC, where I have now found a congenial spiritual home. I have always been interested in spirituality and the meaning of life, but have never cared for conventional organised religion or authoritarian theological dogma. (Put simply, I am a stropky so-and-so, as all my friends will agree!) So the Unitarian ethos suited me – not just ‘believe what you like’, but ‘use your reason and experience, in dialogue with others of different perspectives, to move forward to find a more perfect truth’. Michael Servetus said that everyone has some truth and some error in their beliefs, and that rational argument is better than authoritarian orthodoxy and compulsion for finding out the greater truth. (Naturally, they burned him at the stake for saying this!)

I have always been interested in ‘alternative’ ideas, e.g. meditation, esoteric systems of thought, etc., as well as in conventional science, so I always wish to examine how our current views of the world can be extended to allow for the spiritual factor, in theory and practice – in both ethics, how we relate to the world, and in inner work, how we develop our true spiritual natures.

In line with this I have in the past belonged to various ‘New Age’ groups, which have taught me a lot, but which have always put me off in the end by being either vague and anti-science, or authoritarian and dogmatic just like traditional faiths. However, six years ago, at the Unitarian week in Great Hucklow, I met a lady who pointed me in the direction of Theosophy. I then joined the Manchester Lodge, where I am now a card-carrying member of the Theosophical Society (TS). Interestingly, my original Unitarian friend also comes along to TS meetings, and is indeed now a member herself. Theosophy believes there is an



Absolute principle (that we cannot even describe) lying behind all phenomena. From It emanates the Universe on all planes, from spirit to matter, of which Universe we (and all living things) are a part. The Universe is evolving spiritually and our role is also to develop towards the spirit, and to help the general evolution, so that we have a responsibility towards animals and the planet. There is a book, *The Secret Doctrine*, containing these ideas, but they are presented as a stimulus for thought and discussion, and not as dogma to be blindly believed. Members are thoughtful, kindly, and interested in art, science, philosophy – in fact part of the TS remit is just that, to study current ideas and investigate ‘the powers latent in Humanity and the Universe’. I find it very congenial and encourage you to find out more – there are many internet sites that are free and open to all.

**Mike Rutter**

Chorlton Unitarian Chapel

## Don't throw away the old trinity

To the Editor:

The Rev David Usher, in his address at the Unitarian General Assembly (*The Inquirer*, 26 April), suggested a new GA strap-line: Personal Authenticity, Religious Community, Social Agency. He described them as a ‘new trinity’ to replace the ‘weary, out-dated mantra of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance.’ Hold on there. Yes, it is good to periodically update our message to new times and new slogans need to be tried and tested. But declaring the old trinity outdated is like George W Bush announcing ‘Mission Accomplished’ on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln soon after the US invasion of Iraq. The

reality of subsequent events and the horrific headlines in today's papers demonstrate that, no, the mission had not been accomplished. Let us not now announce that today, here and now, we have finally achieved Freedom, Reason and Tolerance.

Do our papers and news reports no longer carry any stories of intolerance towards minority religions, ethnic groups and nationalities in our land? Do we all now have the same ‘Freedom’ to achieve a meaningful life regardless of circumstance of race, ethnicity and the economic benefits we were born into? Does ‘Reason’ now colour the spiritual life of everyone so that no longer does anyone search for verses in their holy books that they can use to limit the freedom of gays, women and others to fully participate in life? The answers to all these questions are no, no and NO! I bet those Unitarians and Universalists the Rev Usher met in Kenya are inspired more by the old Trinity than his suggested strap-line. In some countries people can be executed for being gay. There, to advocate for Freedom, Reason and Tolerance is truly revolutionary and may put their lives at risk.

I do not share the Rev Usher's distaste for those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. I understand. Words do shift and change their meaning over time. Religion used to be a positive word. At its heart, it can still mean a community of spiritual people but too often it is linked to intolerance, irrational believe systems, a male hierarchy and even institutionalised child-sexual abuse. The word religion has become tainted. That too illustrates the need for the old Trinity.

Don't get me wrong. I do like aspects of what was suggested. However, it does come across as too wordy. A good slogan should be to-the-point and memorable. The new trinity replaces three words with six words of 20 syllables. I was having a hard time remembering it immediately after the Rev Usher's speech and I am thankful *The Inquirer* published the full text. We can experiment with the new statement of values but we must continue to call on the old trinity when needed.

**Russ Alberts**  
Southampton



# Bells peal at Todmorden again

My incurable craving to see a revival of churchgoing was aggravated again on a recent visit to Todmorden Unitarian Church. No longer the home of an active congregation, it is owned by the Historic Chapels Trust as a heritage centre. Recent years have seen excellent work undertaken by the Trust on this large, beautiful, neo-Gothic building and its surroundings. A benefactor left a generous amount of money towards the renovation of the peal of eight bells and a successful campaign to raise the rest of the large amount needed brought us to the sunny July day when the restoration was completed. There are always bell-ringers eager for such an opportunity, so a quarter peal was rung by an invited team at a celebration event. My wife Celia, as a former member of the congregation, contributed to the speeches, a chance to share childhood memories of church-going times, when this was a thriving congregation with all manner of busy activities. Climbing the spiral staircase to the bell-tower to watch the strenuous teamwork of the change ringers, we then descended and walked down the long, steep drive into the town to hear the cheerful chimes echoing across the valley. We hoped that the townsfolk enjoyed the merry sounds, and I was careful not to say, 'It sounds much better from a distance,' as this always gives the wrong impression.

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The Church's stained glass windows are characteristically Unitarian. Scenes from the life and teaching of Jesus: the Good Samaritan, the Woman at the Well, Jesus Blessing the Children, the Prodigal Son, Washing the Disciples' Feet, the Widow's Mite, plus a scene I didn't recognise, but the bible reference gave me the clue. *Luke 10.27* tells of Jesus in discussion with a lawyer, ending with the Two Great Commandments. These windows were intended, we assume, as visual aids to 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal Christianity.

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I wonder if anyone can confirm something I was told many years ago. In former times, bell-ringing was encouraged as a valuable activity for village lads, to work off surplus energy, thereby keeping them out of mischief. A disadvantage to this was the problem of having too much of a good thing; not everyone enjoys the sometimes repetitive sound of bells. The sequence 14235 on five bells, for example, is called 'weasels' because it is the refrain to the children's song 'Pop Goes the Weasel.' So the lads were encouraged to take up weightlifting instead, an activity with a similar, energy-absorbing effect, but much quieter. Is this why their weights are called 'dumbbells'?

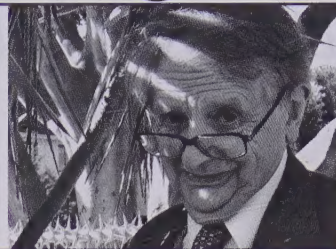
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Todmorden has one of only two peals of bells in our movement, the other being at Gorton, Manchester. The URC church at Port Sunlight has a peal, the similarity of these three places being that they were built by wealthy patrons. The Rev Len Smith has recently undertaken a survey of church bells in nonconformity, to be published soon in *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*. I'm pleased to learn that he has included mention of *Philomel*, a handsome, brass ship's bell that hung in the hallway of Summerville, the former home of Unitarian College, in Daisy Bank Road, Manchester. Generations of students for our ministry were summoned from their beds by its chimes each day, for morning worship before breakfast, and again for dinner in the evening.

Missing from the Todmorden event was Christopher Stell,

## Funny Old World

By  
John Midgley



a life-long Baptist, who would surely have turned up. He died full of years, in January 2014. He was a founder of the Chapels Society (1988) and the Historic Chapels Trust (1993) which now has care of both Todmorden Church and Wallasey Memorial Unitarian Church, plus many more of other denominations. The Trust's *Spring Newsletter* has a delightful obituary from Professor Clyde Binfield: *Christopher Stell had chapel in his bones. Independence, obstinacy, wisdom, humour, shrewdness, pugnacity, pertinacity, determination, achievement, good fellowship, and a way with words, all of them chapel characteristics, were personified in this compactly-built, bowler-hatted or deer-stalked, bustling man.*

I couldn't help but wonder if those 'chapel characteristics' applied to Unitarians too. Obstinacy? Shrewdness? Pugnacity? The HCT obituary continues: *For so independent a person, he was a serial joiner: the Society of Antiquarians, Royal Archaeological Institute, Ancient Monuments Society, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Friends of Dr Williams's Library, Baptist and URC Historical Societies were not half of it. He was assiduous in his attendance at each. Indeed, his presence at an event was a sign that he expected it to be worthwhile.*

His monument, Binfield concludes, consists of his four-volume *Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses* (1986-2002). And here is an opportunity. A copy of this amazing production is available for sale to *Inquirer* readers. Published by HMSO (for the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England), this set of large, sumptuous volumes, beautifully illustrated, has become the standard reference book on nonconformist chapels, and contains many Unitarian buildings. Known among aficionados as 'The Stell', it is available as a set, from Judy Gilley. It belonged to her late husband Keith, former editor of *The Inquirer*. She says, "The books are in near perfect, mint condition, and it would delight Keith's heart to think they were going to a good home. The original set cost £235, but I would accept an offer of something near £150. Proceeds will go to the Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow Fund. That would delight Keith too." Anyone interested should contact me at [johnmidgley60@hotmail.com](mailto:johnmidgley60@hotmail.com), tel: 01756 228387. I'll keep this bargain offer open until mid-September.

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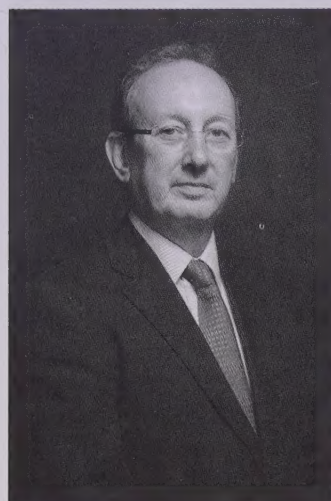
The *Guardian* also had an obituary for Christopher Stell, mentioning the deerstalker, adding, 'for he loved Conan Doyle stories, as only a meticulous detective of buildings would.' I have occasionally come across wearers of deerstalkers at Unitarian events. I associate them with eccentricity, and I'm inclined to add that to the list of endearing chapel characteristics, though I wouldn't wear one myself.

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*



# News in brief

## Belfast minister retires



*The Rev Nigel Playfair*

The Rev Nigel Playfair retired in April after 21 years as minister of First Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Street, Belfast.

He was the first Ulster-born occupant of the pulpit for more than a century. The last local minister was the Reverend John Scott Porter, who took up the post in 1832.

Nigel Playfair, educated in Methodist College, Belfast; and later obtaining degrees, MA from Magee College through Trinity College, Dublin, and BD from London

University, was employed in a full-time teaching post in Dundonald High School. When approached by First Church, he accepted their call and was ordained and installed as minister in February 1993.

During his 21 years of ministry the Rev Playfair continued and developed the church's distinguished tradition of liberal thought and practice. The members of his congregation share the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian and Unitarian ethos; with the church and its services open to all.

The Rev Playfair's love of literature was a recurring element of these services. As well as from his extensive biblical knowledge and appreciation the congregation experienced the pleasure of hearing sermons based on writers such as John Milton, William Blake, RS Thomas, Matthew Arnold, TS Eliot and Socrates, to name but a few.

The Rev Playfair's valedictory sermon emphasised and concluded that the liberalism of First Church and its unique witness was the palladium of the congregation.

## Stratford Church holds festival

Our festival idea was born out of our minister Julian Meek's head – a head that never stops thinking and is full of ideas. After much deliberation, we eventually decided to launch the festival on 23 April – Shakespeare's birthday.

We opened the festival with an amazing retro tea party. We were given wonderful crockery and the food was prepared by us and St Joseph's Hospice, who hold their bereavement group at our church. The CEO of St Joseph's and Unitarian Chief Officer Derek McAuley attended and cut the ribbon. The next evening we had Holly and Coco Chant, two very talented sisters who sang their own material alongside the spoken words of Raymond Antrobus.

Next on the agenda was a very special tea party entitled "the east end meets the Savoy". Gill Myers was at the piano performing Gershwin and other blues tunes. Moving swiftly on, there were two one-man shows. Firstly, an evening with raconteur and wit Alan Harper – performing all his own material. Then it was Dharma Paul reading PG Wodehouse with all the various voices and accents one could imagine. Dharma is known as our Charles Laughton with the wit and humour of Oscar Wilde. To top this we had the 'Scumbags', a local



*Unitarian Chief Officer Derek McAuley (centre) joined the fun at Stratford Unitarian Church's festival. Photo submitted by Vincent Fitzwilliam*

band that will soon be global, with guest speaker Lord Victor Adebawale. The finale was on 7 June with the acapella group 'Anima' singing their own material in their own unique way. (Catch them on YouTube).

We wish to thank all the visual artists, performers, caterers, helpers and people who came. Our special thanks also go to London District Minister David Usher, who provided us with a grant.

– David Carapiet



## Padiham League celebrates 100 years

Padiham Women's League Centenary – Nazareth Chapel. On 14 June 2014 the women's league at Nazareth Unitarian Chapel in Padiham celebrated their centenary with a service conducted by members of the League. It was led by Branch president Maureen Brown and fellow members including Sheila Stott, a Padiham member who is currently the National Women's League President.

Members from other chapels in the NE Lancs district were also represented together with officials from Manchester District Women's League, past ministers, members of the congregation and friends. A retiring collection was held for the chosen League charity, 'Singing for the Brain' which raised £130 for which we are very grateful.

The photograph above, (a preponderance of Padiham Presidents – all currently in office) shows – left to right: Brenda Jones NE Lancs District 2014-17, Sheilah Stott, National President 2014-15, Joyce Thompson, Hon National Vice President and Maureen Brown, Branch President 2013-16 – is this a record?